

# Prague's 200 Days

**The Struggle for Democracy  
In Czechoslovakia.**  
By Harry Schwartz.  
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By FRANCIS B. RANDALL

The history of most countries is at best a tragedy. The Czechs have had the honor to live out a series of high tragedies in the last 700 years, three of them within living memory. Harry Schwartz begins his book by saying, "The 'Czechoslovak spring' of 1968 was one of the most heartening and yet most tragic events in many years. . . . This book is an attempt to tell the story of Czechoslovakia's finest hours." He does indeed tell us what happened: how the last Stalinist dictator in Prague, Antonin Novotny, was forced out and replaced by the moderate Communist leader, Alexander Dubcek, who relaxed many restrictions and was then swept along much farther than he had originally intended by the "historic and unexpected lunge for freedom" of almost the whole Czechoslovak people.

The author tells us about the intricate maneuvers of Dubcek to prevent Moscow from suppressing the new freedom, their failure and the Soviet conquest of Czechoslovakia last August, and the first phases of the extraordinary Czechoslovak campaign of nonviolent resistance to the foreign overlords. All of this is done with thoroughness, accuracy and balance, in spite of the rush in which the book must have been produced.

Mr. Schwartz is the scholar and journalist and New York Times analyst of Communist affairs. Much of his work must be familiar to everyone reading these words. He was in Czechoslovakia several times during the events he describes, and he had early access to most information on the country. It is natural and expected that he should write such a book, well, and soon. His style is often zippy; he titles chapters, "The Scandals of March" and "The Suicides of April." His tone indicates qualified sympathy for Dubcek, complete sympathy for the Czechoslovak people and unrelenting, cold-war-like hostility to Czech Stalinists and

People have criticized Mr. Schwartz

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For sharing and in part molding the views of the American Establishment on Communism, and for choosing a publisher who used to cooperate with the C. I. A. Therefore one must say that our Establishment and its institutions, whatever their ghastly sins elsewhere, have been quite right in their judgments on Communism in Prague. There are elements of tragic ambivalence in Communist rule over Russia and China, but Czechoslovakia was a developed and democratic country to which the Communists brought only bungling and tyranny. If our Establishment receives this book well, that will reveal a good side of the Establishment, not a fault in Mr. Schwartz.

He says, "I have tried . . . to consider the warts as well as the halos in Czechoslovakia." He dwells on the persisting feud between Czechs and Slovaks (to a foreigner, simply beside the point), and on the anti-Semitism that was so handy a tool for the Stalinists. He portrays Dubcek as a limited person, authentically pro-Soviet until the invasion, with "no real program for Czechoslovakia" when he took office in January, 1968, no taste for genuine democracy, and no great political skill. Dubcek became a better man in the course of 1968, but stout old President Svoboda emerges as a more defiant and attractive figure. Mr. Schwartz wonders rather pointedly whether Dubcek and the Czechoslovaks would not have done better to threaten armed resistance to the U. S. S. R. from the start, and to have gone through with it.

One can disagree with some of Mr. Schwartz's interpretations. He thinks that Brezhnev and his group ordered the invasion for fear that the de-Communization in Prague would spread to the rest of Eastern Europe and to the U. S. S. R. That was certainly a major factor, but so was the irrational but genuine fear in Moscow that Dubcek was opening a hole in the Soviet bloc's defenses against resurgent West German influence and, presently, armies.

Mr. Schwartz tends to play this down. He thinks the invasion and its results were a colossal Soviet bungle. Brezhnev committed many foolish errors, but it is too soon to say that he was not successful in preventing for some years the Communization of Eastern Europe that threatens his rule and his system of

Communism. Eternal vigilance is the price of tyranny!

Mr. Schwartz concludes hopefully, "There will be others in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere who will pick up the torch lit by Dubcek and his colleagues." True enough, and if history teaches us anything, that torch will some day be extinguished yet again by armed force. That, perhaps, is the ultimate tragedy of Prague's 200 days. ■

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